
Suggested Outline for Thesis/Dissertation Proposals¹

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Anthropology contains so many modes of research that it is difficult to prepare a “one size fits all” outline for what a research proposal should contain. This outline is only a suggestion for structuring your thesis or dissertation proposal; **students must consult with their advisor** about the format, length, and content of the proposal. Italicized parts of this document are for general guidance and should be used, adapted, or omitted as appropriate depending on the nature of your study.

Length: There is no required length; it really depends on the project, the complexity of the plan, and the desires of your committee. Most faculty will want more than 8 pages, but fewer than 30 (with MA proposals generally shorter than PhD proposals). Keep in mind that it is just a proposal, not the thesis itself. However, a well done thesis or dissertation proposal becomes the foundation of the first three chapters of the final thesis/dissertation, so effort at this stage is never wasted.

1. Introduction

Describe your research question/hypothesis or research objective. That is, what will the focus of your investigation be and why is it significant?

- Describe the general subject or issue to be studied
- Explain why your issue is important to the general subject under study – think of topics of broad interest to many in the field of anthropology (not just to those working in one small geographic area or on one small issue).
- Give primary objectives of the study

The formulation of a developed research question, hypothesis, or research objective is the single most important characteristic of a successful proposal. There are three major guidelines that you should follow:

- 1. The research question, hypothesis or objective should be narrowly focused and ask “why,” “how,” or “what” about an issue of significance to anthropology. Do not present a vast research topic as the object of investigation; instead develop answerable questions (or testable hypotheses) in the context of the larger research topic.*
- 2. Research questions should not be presented as if the answer were already known. You need to demonstrate that the proposed research will answer (or test) the question(s) or hypothesis.*
- 3. You should also be realistic about what can be achieved. Many grant applications fail because they assert that the research will answer such a wide variety of questions that the investigation may not answer any single one fully and carefully.*

2. Background/Review of the Literature

A description of what is already known about this issue and short discussion of why the background studies are not sufficient. How does your research build on existing scholarship in anthropology and closely related disciplines? Give specific examples of this scholarship and its findings.

- Summarize / synthesize what is already known about the field (or several fields important to your study). Include ample citations of primary literature.
- Through this section, demonstrate why this area of study is of importance.
- Point out why these background studies are insufficient. In other words, what question(s) do they leave unresolved?
- Show how your study will address one of these unanswered questions. Be explicit in showing how your research will expand on previous findings.

3. Methods and Materials

What evidence will you need to collect to answer your research question? How will you go about collecting this evidence?

You must clearly and explicitly demonstrate that the evidence gathered and the analytical procedures proposed will realistically support the research goals expressed in your Introduction.

You should also be prepared to demonstrate that the plan for conducting the research can be managed in the allotted time and with the available funds. A feasible research plan with clearly defined procedures is much better than one so broad that it seems impossible to accomplish within the limits of the time and funding available. (see parts 5 and 6 of proposal).

The Department encourages projects using any and all appropriate methods of data collection and analysis commonly employed in anthropology, including both qualitative and quantitative methods, laboratory, archival and/or museum research, and fieldwork involving archaeological, survey, linguistic or ethnographic techniques. You should work closely with your chair/committee to develop methods appropriate to your study.

- Objectives: List the **specific** question(s) that you are exploring. *NOTE: the degree of specificity or formality of your objectives will vary, depending on the nature of your study and the type of data you will collect.*
 - Explain how these research questions are related to the larger issues raised in the introduction.
- Methods: description of from what / whom you will collect the data, and why. *Examples of some types of issues you may need to consider include:*
 - *What groups of people will you interview, or sites will you examine, or primates will you study, or literature will you survey?*
 - *Why did you choose these and not others?*
 - *What is the nature of your sample (why this community, how many specimens, how divided [by sex, age, portions of sites, parts of skeleton, whatever])? How is this appropriate or useful for the study you plan to conduct?*
 - *What information will you be focusing on or types of data will you collect?*
 - *How will you collect the data? (Interviews, questionnaires, measurements, coding of information, etc.) Will you live with informants for a period of time? Will you travel to many sites? Will you follow animals over many seasons? Visit 4 collections? Provide sample interview protocol, data sheet, questionnaire, as appropriate. Give as much detail as possible.*

- *Why is this method of data collection appropriate for this study? Cite literature on similar studies, if appropriate.*
- How will you analyze these data? [*This part of the proposal has perhaps the widest variation, depending on the nature of your study and the types of data you are collecting.*]
 - *If qualitative discussion and evaluation of interviews, etc., what approaches will you use and why are these appropriate? See, e.g., <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/OR/OR3-1/heath.html> on qualitative research.*
 - *If statistical tests, which ones, and why are these appropriate for the questions you are asking? If appropriate to your study, list each specific hypothesis/test question, the data that will address it, and the statistical test(s) to be used.*
 - *Keep in mind that your study should be designed so that the outcome is not predetermined. Consider what sorts of outcomes would lead to different answers to the questions you are asking.*
- If appropriate, discuss ethical issues associated with your study and how they will be addressed. Present Human Subjects Review or Animal Studies Review Clearance if needed. If there are any safety or access issues involved with the fieldwork or other forms of data collection, describe how they will be managed.

4. Significance and Conclusion

How will your proposed research lead to a significant improvement over the original studies, and what contribution does it make to anthropological theory and to the discipline? A good proposal emphasizes the contribution of the proposed research not only to the specific area of research being addressed but also to the broader field of anthropology. Be explicit in relation to the potential contribution of your research to anthropological theory and debate in the broadest possible sense.

(In other words, why should someone care? If you were applying for money to do this, why would someone fund you? If you wanted to publish your results, why would they be interesting? What are the primary limitations to the study?)

5. Project Schedule

Estimated time to complete each stage of the study (as outlined in the methods section).

6. Budget

General estimate of the cost of important phases of the study. If you know potential sources of funding, you may want to indicate these as well.

7. Literature Cited

The references cited should focus on the central research question and its related debates. References should be formatted according to the standard for your subfield (*American Ethnologist* for sociocultural, *Linguistic Anthropology* for linguistics, *Amer. J. Phys. Anthropol.* for biological, and *Amer. Antiquity* for archaeology).

¹ Loosely adapted from Wenner Gren proposal guidelines (July 2005, <http://www.wennergren.org/dfappinfo.pdf> and L. Santelmann's outline for Applied Linguistics proposals (August, 2005, <http://web.pdx.edu/~dbls/proposals.html>).